

Songs of Innocence

Songs of Experience

Jim Shaw

Meg Cranston, Mike Kelley, Collier Schorr, Jim Shaw, Gary Simmons, and Alexis Smith challenge the established myth of childhood innocence through their art. Using the objects and language of children — timeworn toys, pinafore dresses, hand-scrawled messages — these artists seek to reveal how family relations, play, punishment, and schooling affect the formation of social, racial, and sexual values. By examining playground politics, family structure, and gender identification, seemingly innocent toys and words garner new meanings, both humorous and haunting, as they are recontextualized in the artists' visions of young lives.

Rather than simply represent images of childhood or allude to its icons, these artists incorporate actual objects and words, often with some alterations. The focal objects or texts, however, remain relatively unmediated so that the work empowers viewers to make associative connections. The objects then become signs that radiate out to include not only the artist's intention but also the viewer's memories. This use of

"the real thing" plays with the viewer's desire to authenticate the content. In this way, fictive characters take on the guise of reality.

Jim Shaw's series *My Mirage*, for example, begun in 1985, traces the development of the artist's alter ego, Billy, from early childhood through turbulent adolescence to born-again Christianity and televangelism. Shaw charts this fictive path

with the visual language of Billy's life: yearbooks and comics, album covers and Lincoln Logs. To underscore the narrative and documentary character of Billy, Shaw insistently adheres to a visual format of 17 x 14 inches. Like pages in a book or frames in a strip of film, Billy's life unfolds for the viewer. Yet these markers are not mere snapshots of Billy's past; rather they represent an editorialized biography composed by Shaw. In *Billy's Self-Portrait #1* (1986), from the *My*



Mirage series, we see how Billy views himself as a cover boy on a Famous Monsters of Filmland magazine. We also are privy to how he sees others. Girls in Billy's Class #1 (1986) at first recalls a tear sheet from a high school yearbook – an alphabetical catalogue of broad, bland faces. Shaw, however, replaces the girls' names with religious affiliations such as Protestant, Catholic, Dutch Reformed. This labeling transforms the individuals into types and exposes Billy's system of identification.



While the My Mirage works trace an individual life, they also address a particular era, in this case the middle-class American Midwest during the fifties and sixties. Alexis Smith also presents visual language of specific periods; however, a cultural rather than individual retrojection pervades her mixed-media collages. By joining found objects with literary quotations in a layering of familiar images, expressions, and textures, Smith, like Shaw, identifies characters and types. A generic everywoman is the subject of Smith's Jane Doe (1985), which both celebrates and cautions against ambition and speed. A victory wreath frames a painted cartoon horse in the first of the three panels. The wreath, now dried and brittle – a memento mori of success – foreshadows the tragic tone of the piece. The background of the second panel is an illustration from a Dick and Jane story. It shows Jane, having lost a roller skate, stumbling off-balance. Smith's added text warns, "In the winter, especially, there are always crashes." Loss of control is reiterated by a detached steering wheel centered on an appliance advertisement in the final panel. These thwarted attempts at control, from child's play to adult domesticity, suggest that the odds are against Jane in this game of life.

In Boys Town (1988), the "slow learner" is branded by a cautioning orange traffic sign laid over an

androgynous teenager's face. More than simply freezing a moment from the past, however, Smith projects the narrative forward: at lower left is a criminal record from the FBI, accompanied by the text "Schooled in the Raw Road Night." Smith matches pasts with futures, expectations with outcomes.

Gary Simmons, too, looks to the past in his theatrical tableau Disinformation Supremacy Board (1989). Here the familiar childhood classroom is abandoned by students and adults alike, becoming a ghostly environment in which only the tools for teaching remain: chalk, chalkboards, and school desks. A neat row of desks faces a series of elongated chalkboards. Transformed into pristine "whiteboards," the panels loom commandingly. Yet the white chalk that rests on their lower frames can convey no discernible message. The effect is like the futility of perception experienced with white noise or snow blindness. And because the lessons are neither heard nor read, the authority of the classroom chalk mark is negated. The stark boards, moreover, stand in sharp contrast to the marked surfaces of the wooden desk tops. As surrogate students, the desks belie attentiveness with their penned and carved messages of anger, love, and rock-and-roll.

The racist allusions which are merely implied in the title by the word supremacy are reinforced by the repeated use of white. Simmons treats the theme of racial tension more explicitly in other works. Mr. Klan Man (1991) suggests that prejudice is learned not only in the classroom but also in one's own backyard — or front lawn. This work reverses the racism inherent in the typical lawn jockey statue, as the familiar blue-suited, black-faced servant becomes an equally notorious icon — the white-robed Klansman. The statue, standing outside the house, mirrors the racist owner within. Polished and colorless, the

Gary Simmons

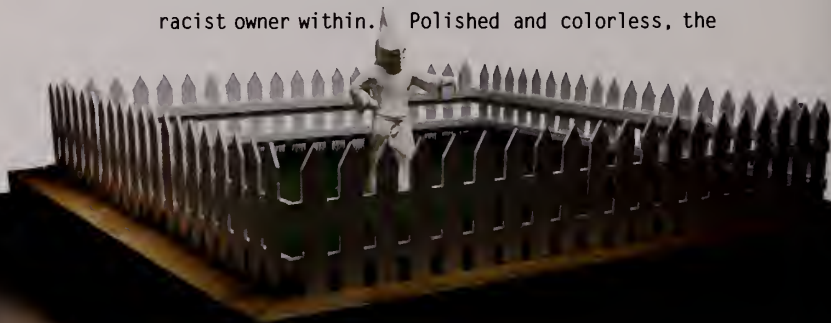


figure is centered on a real plot of rich suburban grass surrounded by a white picket fence that has no gate. The fence thus protectively encircles and isolates the statue. By setting the Klan figure on an actual lawn, Simmons presents a flip side of another Klan-associated image: lawns violently scarred by

burnt crosses. Ironically, the support of this work, its literal flip side, is a wooden base of stacked cross ties – an underground railroad of sorts.

While Simmons searches for the roots of racism, Collier Schorr addresses sexism. The sugar-and-spice recipe for the making of

little girls gives way to confrontational language games in her word-layered objects. The Cat and the Cow (1967-91), a diminutive plaster-covered garment, at first seems strangely mute, like Simmons' whiteboards. Frozen waves of fabric, however, pull the viewer closer, and a voyeuristic glance into the lining of the dress reveals a cacophony of aggressive language penciled on the inner skirt. Rather than clothe a young body, the ghostlike cast is filled with a childish scrawl of taunts, truisms, and graffiti: "Come closer I won't hurt you," "Sweet as sugar," "Jack was here '65." These phrases, not immediately visible, reveal themselves like vague memories, and join the "ideal" girl, skirted and ruffled, to what Schorr perceives as the real world of the playground – sexual and violent. The twenty-four-year genesis of the work, according to the artist's dating system, begins with the date of the garment and, implicitly, that of Schorr's childhood as well. The Cat and the Cow thus represents an expanse of real time – the evolution of a young life – which acknowledges its past from the vantage of the present.

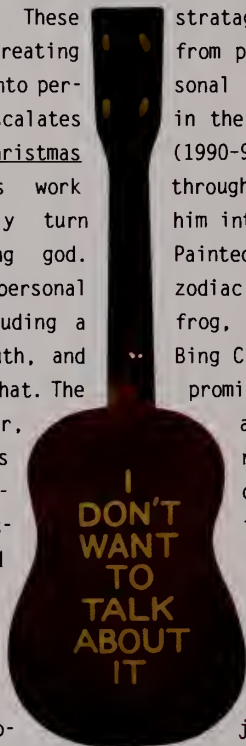
Schorr's Housetrap series mimics the scale of doll houses. These works are propped up and hinged as crude traps, waiting to ensnare their next victim. The "home," a lure of domesticity and the center stage of family relations, loses its sheltering comfort. Schorr

Collier Schorr

Meg Cranston

brings viewers to their knees to peer through the trap's portal or down the chimney. Inside, words better left unspoken become the literal writing on the wall: "He liked to set fires, watching the flames lick like a cat's tongue, bringing the flush to your faces." In The Sleight of His Hand (1975-92), the boy's pyromaniacal impulse renders the setting a house of pain, not of protection. His homing instinct is destructive. As with the cast dresses, Schorr here exposes the dark side of childhood experience and brings the family skeletons out of the closet.

Meg Cranston similarly layers objects with language in her work from the late eighties. Bright blue letters roughly painted on an antique drum advise readers to PLAY DUMB. The instrument, literally mute, suggests the female role of subordination, along with its corollaries, ignorance and silence. In another work, the strings of a toy guitar face the wall. Silenced of its musical voice, the guitar instead declares in painted block letters, I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT. These angry child retreating or discipline into per-indignation escalates Everyday Is Christmas permeates this work that childishly turn and gift-giving god. walls is a personal symbols - including a an anorexic youth, and wearing a Santa hat. The by them, however, the frog does prince, the an-not become beau-hand-crafted placed on the figures are different in another. These reveal the sub-maker - just as Santa becomes a god, Mary, isolated and miniature, represents the model single parent. Ironically, it is the little drummer boy who towers over the scene. By transforming his drum into a



cocktail glass, Cranston converts traditional religious symbolism into modern holiday experiences of office parties and drunken celebrations. On the opposite wall, facing this sea of images, is an angry letter to Santa Claus. Mounted in a diploma frame, which traditionally documents a rite of passage, the letter willfully rebukes Santa's existence in a statement of self-reliance: "I don't believe in you. I don't think about you. Don't climb down my chimney, don't darken my door...I'll buy my own stereo. I'll get my own T.V."

Mike Kelley's tattered and handled toys immediately speak of previous, pre-art owners. Kelley gathers carnival-quality stuffed animals that have been weathered by playful use. If pristine, unowned animals would suggest a benign, sexless ideal, then Kelley presents the gritty reality of toys that teach "doctor," "house," and other lessons of childhood. In Fruit of Thy Loins (1990) a phantasmagorical melding of animals springs from the body of a plush bunny rabbit. Arms at its side, paws turned outward, the rabbit seems to shrug with indifference at its strange

birth-giving. More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid (1987), with ears of harvest corn at the upper corners, is an abundant tapestry of afghans, animals, and dolls. Missing eyes and clothing, the toys, "loved" to the point of abuse, demand retribution for their distress. Atonement comes with The Wages of Sin (1987), a psychedelic altar of sixties-style candles. Kelley's intonations of religious correctitude seem to conflate this kind of play with sin, inevitable and unacceptable to authoritative eyes.

These artists examine the terrain of childhood — fictive or real, lost or saved — with an adult hindsight that questions its mythical innocence. Their works, presented with frankness and humor, often startle viewers with familiar, if previously forgotten, images of their own pasts.

Kathryn Kanjo

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth.

Meg Cranston (b. 1960)

I Don't Want to Talk About It, 1987

Oil on wood, 23 x 7 1/2 x 2 1/2

Private collection

Leave Me Alone, 1987

Acrylic on canvas, 12 parts, 10 x 8 each

Collection of the artist

Play Dumb, 1988

Acrylic on drum, 7 x 9 3/4 (diameter)

Collection of the artist

Becoming a Monster, 1990

Mixed media, dimensions variable

Collection of the artist

Everyday Is Christmas, 1990-91

Mixed media, dimensions variable

Collection of the artist

Mike Kelley (b. 1954)

More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid

and The Wages of Sin, 1987

Stuffed fabric toys and afghans on canvas with dried corn, 90 x 119 1/4 x 5; wax candles on wood and metal base, 52 x 23 3/4 x 23 3/4

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 89.13a-e

Arena #3 (Green Circle), 1990

Mixed media on tablecloth, 81 diameter

Private collection

Double Figure (Equal Weight Orange), 1990

Sewn stuffed toys, 21 x 21 1/2 x 11

Private collection

Double Flaccid Cat, 1990

Yarn dolls, 30 x 12 x 6 1/2

Collection of Cindy Sherman and Michel Auder

Four Yarn Figures, 1990
Yarn dolls, 15 x 15 x 5
Collection of Tassos Karavias

Fruit of Thy Loins, 1990
Stuffed animals, 39 x 21 x 12
Collection of Linda and Harry Macklowe

Untitled (Three Afghans), 1990
Sewn afghans, 29 x 20 x 12
Private collection

Collier Schorr (b. 1963)

The Whipping Girl, 1963-91
Plaster of Paris, ink, and graphite
15 x 13 1/2 x 10 1/2
Collection of Barbara and Howard Morse

The Cat and the Cow, 1967-91
Plaster of Paris, ink, and graphite, 13 x 14 x 9
Collection of Vijak Mahdavi and Bernardo Nadal-Ginard

Drive By (Spofford), 1969-92
Acrylic, graphite, ink, and paper on wood, with steel
14 1/2 x 10 x 14 1/2
303 Gallery, New York

Narrow Rooms, 1973-92
Acrylic, graphite, ink, and paper on wood, with steel
14 1/2 x 10 x 14 1/2
303 Gallery, New York

The Sleight of His Hand, 1975-92
Acrylic, graphite, ink, and paper on wood, with steel
14 1/2 x 10 x 14 1/2
303 Gallery, New York

Grab, 1990
Cibachrome photograph, 24 x 20
303 Gallery, New York

The Two Sophias, 1990
Cibachrome photograph, 24 x 20
Collection of Barbara and Howard Morse

Uli with Ruppert and Some Girls, 1990
Cibachrome photograph, 24 x 20
303 Gallery, New York

Jim Shaw (b. 1952)

The Andersons, 1986

Videotape, sound, 2 1/2 minutes

Lent by Metro Pictures, New York

Billy's Self-Portrait #1, 1986

Gouache on board, 17 x 14

Collection of Judy and Stuart Spence

Girls in Billy's Class #1, 1986

Oil on canvas, 17 x 14

Collection of Heide Perlman and Tim Martin

Jesus' Life as a Boy, 1986

Xerox and ink on board, 17 x 14

Collection of Judy and Stuart Spence

On Beyond Wednesday, 1986

Xerox and watercolor on board, 17 x 14

Collection of the artist

Tree of Knowledge, 1986

Oil on canvas, 17 x 14

Collection of Judy and Stuart Spence

Billy Goes to a Party #4, 1987

Videotape, sound, 21 minutes

Lent by Metro Pictures, New York

The True/False Mirror, 1987

Videotape, sound, 5 minutes

Lent by Metro Pictures, New York

The Dog Ate My Homework, 1988

Ink on paper, 17 x 14

Collection of Judy and Stuart Spence

What's Happening?, 1989

Videotape, sound, 11 minutes

Lent by Metro Pictures, New York

Marionette, 1990

Mixed media, 17 x 14

Private collection

Ecology Box, 1991

Mixed media, 17 x 14

Collection of Barbara and Howard Morse

Three Relationships, 1991

Crayon, oil pastel, watercolor, and ink on board, 17 x 14

Private collection; courtesy Feature, New York

Gary Simmons (b. 1964)

Disinformation Supremacy Board, 1989

Mixed media, 104 x 154 x 40

Collection of the artist

Mr. Klan Man, 1991

Mixed media, 53 x 103 x 103

Collection of Peter and Eileen Norton;

courtesy Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa Monica

Wall Drawing (Erasure Series), 1992

Chalk and paint, 84 x 181

Collection of the artist

Alexis Smith (b. 1949)

Always a Sucker for Brawn, 1985

Mixed-media collage, 16 3/4 x 16

Collection of Deborah and Bernie Brillstein

Jane Doe, 1985

Mixed-media collage, 3 panels: 29 3/8 x 24 3/4;

29 x 22 1/2; 29 3/8 x 23

Refco Group, Ltd., Chicago

Boys Town, 1988

Mixed-media collage, 38 9/16 x 29

Collection of Josh Baer

Boy's Life, 1989

Lithograph with collage, 30 x 44 1/2

Josh Baer Gallery, New York, and Margo Leavin Gallery,

Los Angeles

Photographs: Angela Cumberbirch (Schorr, The Cat and the Cow);
Fredrik Nilsen (Shaw, Billy's Self-Portrait #1); Douglas M. Parker
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212-554-1113

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945 Madison Avenue
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